

# Iris Gardens founder George Sutton passes away

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George Sutton, the founder of Sutton Iris Gardens, died early Wednesday following a long illness. He was 80 years old.

His death comes just a few weeks after his wife, Margaret Sutton, died. Her death came on the eve of the 15th annual Iris Festival in April that the Suttons played such a huge role in its founding.

“George was a big champion behind the Iris Festival and celebrating the city flower,” said Porterville Chamber of Commerce president and CEO Donnette Silva-Carter. “We’re going to miss him as a friend of the community and as a friend,” she added.

Services are pending with Myers Funeral Service, said the Suttons’ son, Michael.

The Suttons brought their business that began as a hobby and grew to be well known worldwide to Porterville in 1988. Their beautiful garden on Road 208 became a destination point every Iris Festival.

In 2012, Sutton Iris Gardens was honored as the chamber’s Small Business of the Year.

Michael said his dad went to an Iris show in the 1970s when the family lived in Ukiah. He said his dad bought some irises, came back the next year and entered them and won a prize and “he began growing them more and more.”

The business took root from there. “First we took out the lawns, then the neighbor’s lawns,” said Michael, who ran the business with his father. The business officially began in 1983. By the time they moved to Porterville, Sutton’s Iris Gardens was already well-known, but George and Michael took it to new heights. George Sutton was known for developing many new hybrids of irises.

It was just coincidence that the Suttons moved to a town where the official flower was the iris, but that flower became the city’s official flower in 1963.

In Porterville, the farm on Road 208 grew to more than 100 acres. In its beautiful gardens are literally hundreds of different irises — from white to black and every color imaginable in between. “To be your hobby and turn it into an internationally recognized business was huge,” said Silva-Carter.

In 1999, the Suttons teamed with the Chamber to begin the Iris Festival, an event that has become the city’s signature event. This year’s festival drew more than 25,000 people to town. Michael Sutton said he and his father visited an Iris Festival in Silverton, Ore. and brought the idea back to Porterville. With a little coaxing, they convinced the chamber to begin a similar festival here. “It just worked out amazingly well,” said Michael, adding that both the family business and the community benefitted.

Besides Michael, Mr. Sutton is survived by a daughter, Peggy.